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ABSTRACT

An experiment was conducted to investigate the hypothesis that English cliches reflect sex-specific styles of speech and that sex-specificity of expressions is related to differential usage by male and female speakers. Hypotheses were derived from Tyler's claims that the "neutral sphere" is infused by the male style, rendering it an inhibiting speech environment for women. They included: (a) Can speakers reliably classify commonly used metaphors as masculine, feminine, or neutral? And, if so, by what criteria? (b) If the metaphors can be subdivided, are some more vivid and effective than others? (c) If the metaphors can be subdivided, do men and women differ in usage? Eighty idiomatic expressions were rated by subjects on a scale with regard to: (a) vividness or image-forming capacity, (b) sex-specific associations with traditional sex roles, (c) subject's understanding of the metaphor's accepted meaning, and (d) frequency of usage by the subject. Results indicated that subjects regard some expressions as sex-specific. Of these, "masculine" expressions are more vivid, and more often include action verbs. "Feminine" expressions are considered dull, and more often include no verbs, or passive or static verbs. Expressions most frequently used by both women and men tend to be sex-neutral. (Author)

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IDIOMS AND METAPHORS:
VIVIDNESS AND SEX-SPECIFICITY
AS RELATED TO USAGE BY MALE AND FEMALE SPEAKERS

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Idioms and metaphors constitute a significant portion of the English language. This paper is going to investigate the hypothesis that infiltration by sex-specific styles exists within our language, and that it affects differential usage by male and female speakers. In particular at the last SECOL meeting, Tyler argued that the seemingly sex-neutral language of business, scholarship, or public policy is actually infused by the male style. One set of examples which she offered concerned metaphorical expressions that one often uses: "in the wrong ball park," "on board," "on target"--all expressions with masculine content, but never such expressions as "in the wrong cannister." Tyler suggested that such influence of masculine speech patterns on neutral styles might render the so-called "neutral sphere" an inhibiting speech environment for women.[1] This study was designed to test three hypotheses derived from these claims. They are: (a) Can speakers reliably classify commonly used metaphors as masculine, feminine, or neutral? And, if so, what criteria do they use? (b) If the metaphors can be subdivided, are some more effective than others? (That is, are masculine expressions more vivid than feminine expressions?) and (c) If the metaphors can be subdivided, do men and women differ in their usage?

This project developed from a directed individual research study. I'd like to thank my professor at Florida State University, Dr. Mary Tyler, who provided me with the idea for such a study,

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[1]Tyler, M. Why sex-based language differences are elusive. Paper read at SECOL XV, November 1976.

and guided me throughout the phases of this undertaking. I'd also like to thank Dr. Peter Menzel for his assistance with the linguistic aspect in examining the expressions. I have been a student in psychology, and have had very little background in linguistics. The paper I am presenting is concerned with basic findings and generalities. Perhaps you, as professional linguists, can unearth more specific discoveries relating to the usage of idioms and metaphors by sex-specific speakers.

Eighty idiomatic expressions were presented to two groups of students in introductory psychology courses at Florida State University this past fall. These expressions were informally collected: roughly half of them I ran across in my own conversations and readings, jotting them down as I heard or read them. The other half were supplied for me by my friends and coworkers.

The first group of subjects consisted of 25 females and 20 males. First, the group rated the vividness or image-forming capacities of each expression using a 1-5 scale. (See handout, page 1.) Assigning a "1" to an expression signified that the subject saw it as a dull, bland, unimaginative, ineffective metaphor, unable to conjure up a clear image in one's mind. At the other end of the continuum, a rating of "5" signified that the subject thought it was a powerful, descriptive, interesting, and effective metaphor that comes quickly to mind.

The second task for this group was to rate the same 80 expressions, but this time with respect to sex-specific associations with traditional male and female sex roles on a 1-5 scale.

(See handout, page 2.) In this case assigning a rating of "1" signified a very masculine sex-role association; a "2", a somewhat masculine association; a "3" signified neutral association--neither masculine nor feminine; a "4" meant a somewhat feminine association; and a "5" signified very feminine. The subjects were instructed to concentrate on the image itself, as opposed to who may use it.

The second group consisted of 39 subjects; 24 males and 15 females, who rated the same eighty expressions.

The first task for this second group was to rate the expressions with regards to each subject's understanding of the meaning of the metaphor using a 1-4 scale. A "1" signified that the subject had never heard of the phrase and did not know its meaning; "2" meant that the subject had heard the expression, though did not know its meaning; a "3" meant that the subject had not heard the expression before, but felt that he or she knew its meaning; and an expression was assigned a "4" when subjects had heard it before as well as knew its meaning.

Their second task was to rate the expressions keeping in mind the subject's personal usage of each metaphor on a 1-4 scale. (See handout, page 3.) A "1" signified that the subject had never used the phrase, nor could imagine ever using it. A "2" meant that the subject could imagine using it under certain circumstances in the appropriate situation. A "3" signified the subject could imagine using it in speech and thinking that the subject had used it occasionally. A "4" indicated that the subject had frequently used it. Variations of the expressions

were acceptable. For example, "A stick in the mud" and "Don't be a stick in the mud" were synonymous.

For each expression the response ratings were tallied for the four different tasks. Means were calculated for each item indicating the item's image-forming ability, its sex-specific association, the subjects' understanding of its meaning, and usage of the expressions in speech. The items whose means were ranked as the highest fifteen and the lowest fifteen in these four categories are those that have been considered in the results and discussion sections of this study. These are basic findings; further multi-variable research should be continued.

The means of the task to rate the expressions' meaning as comprehended by the subjects indicated that the majority of the subjects understood the expressions with one exception being "wearing your heart on your sleeve." For this item only one male had heard it before and knew its meaning, as opposed to nine females who gave it the same rating. This is similar to the work of Ernster on menstrual expressions, who found that there were some expressions only women knew and used, and there were some expressions only men knew and used.[2] Because the task of understanding yielded very few variations among responses, it will not be utilized in the remainder of this paper as an important variable to consider.

On the handout, page 1, the dullest and most vivid expressions are listed. Of the nine most vivid, image-producing

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[2]Ernster, V. L. American menstrual expressions. Sex Roles, 1975, 1, 3-13.

expressions, all but two contained action verbs: hitting robbing, walking, painting, killing, rubbing, and putting. Though "to rake" is an action verb, its context in "raked over the coals" is as a patient verb. The other expression, "up a creek without a paddle" contained no verb. In the list of the dullest expressions, only four action verbs were found: crying, slice, bringing, and passing. The rest contain "be" verbs, passive verbs, or contain no verb at all. The dull expressions seem difficult for one to experience and in turn to envision mentally, whereas one can imagine actually doing the vivid expressions and can picture doing them.

In reviewing the sex-specific association lists on page 2 of the handout, it becomes apparent that the subjects have linked masculinity with strength, sports, mechanics, and finances: "muscled into it," "out in left field," "throwing a wrench in your plans," and "passing the buck." Femininity was associated with the traditional household things women do, their stereotyped emotional and romantic orientation, and food: "on pins and needles," "swept off your feet," and "spilled the beans." It is interesting to note that "wearing your heart on your sleeve" was rated fairly high on the feminine scale (3.80), while "something up your sleeve," received a 2.78--very close to neutral. It seems that the word "heart" influenced the subjects to associate the expression with femininity. As far as most are concerned, geese and ducks appear neutral enough; and when there was "a sitting duck," the subjects gave it a 2.71 (neutral) rating. However, when "your goose is cooked," it comes out with

a 4.00 (feminine) rating. Cooking is evidently the deciding factor, as the expression, "what's cooking?" received the highest feminine rating of all eighty expressions.

In comparing vividness and sex-specificity the noticeable trend is that the vivid expressions are listed on the top half of page 2 of the handout. Among these metaphors, seven contained action verbs: muscled, hitting, throwing, using, railroaded, passing, and painting. Two contained nouns derived from action verbs: chip and grind. On the masculine list there was only one expression also found on the dull list: "passing the buck." The vivid list contained three masculine expressions: "put your nose to the grindstone," "hitting below the belt," and "painting the town red." All of these previous masculine expressions contain action verbs. In the list of the feminine expressions there were only four action verbs: slice, looking, buttering, and skirting; and these verbs are not as dynamic in the sense of exerting effort, as the masculine expressions which imply the expenditure of energy. There were eight passive or static verbs: born, wrapped, wearing, spoon-fed, living, tied, cooked, and swept. Two were "be" verbs. On the feminine list were three dull phrases: "what's cooking?," "mum's the word," and "no matter how you slice it;" and three vivid phrases: "tied to your mother's apron strings," "wrapped around your little finger," and "swept off your feet," which are all passive verbs. Of these previous feminine expressions, there was only a single action verb: slice.

These findings of dynamic action verbs in masculine expressions and passive/static verbs in feminine expressions seem to

reflect the traditional sex roles of our culture; the dominant, aggressive male and the passive, submissive female. The question that comes to mind concerns usage. Are vivid/masculine expressions used more often than dull/feminine expressions? Are women limited to the household in their source of metaphors for usage in speech, in contrast to men whose metaphors originate in sports, mechanics, and the working-business world? To answer this question of who uses the sex-specific expressions, let us look at the usage sheet on page 3 of the handout. Lo and behold! We find that thirteen of the fifteen most commonly used expressions are sex-NEUTRAL! The only two exceptions, "wrapped around your little finger" and "buttering you up" are from the feminine list. In reviewing the tally sheet, there were no discrepancies between the sexes as to usage of these metaphors. It appears that the sex-specific association has no bearing on metaphor usage by male or female speakers. In fact, the mean of the means for sex-specificity is exactly 3.00! (as neutral as possible).

To summarize, it appears that sex roles are carried over into the sphere of language, but in an intricate, complex fashion. Looking at the three initial questions, the findings suggest that we can respond with a "yes": that expressions can be subdivided into sex-specific worlds: masculine, feminine, and neutral; we can also respond affirmatively that in such subdivisions, the masculine expressions are more vivid (using action verbs) than the feminine expressions--considered dull (using passive and static verbs). The most frequently used expressions are almost

unanimously sex-neutral: seemingly to demonstrate that usage is unrelated to the image and sex-specificity.

Further research in this field may seek to shed more light onto the issue of differentiations among sex-specific expressions, as well as insight into the reason why male and female speakers do not resort to their same sex-specific expressions.

SCALE

1	2	3	4	5
Dull, bland, uninteresting, unimaginative				Interesting, vivid, powerful

IMAGE MEANS

DULL		SEX	USAGE
mum's the word	1.76	3.82	1.79
what's cooking	1.96	4.40	2.49
going right to town	2.04	3.20	2.03
crying wolf	2.18	2.80	2.03
what a breeze	2.24	3.18	3.28
a stick in the mud	2.29	2.84	2.08
full of hot air	2.29	2.80	3.15
in a pickle	2.36	3.31	1.90
no matter how you slice it	2.38	3.67	2.41
the last straw	2.38	2.89	3.21
a stuffed shirt	2.40	2.42	1.64
a sitting duck	2.40	2.71	2.64
bringing home the bacon	2.44	2.36	1.24
passing the buck	2.47	2.29	2.49
no strings attached	2.49	3.13	3.21
	$\bar{X}$ = 2.27	$\bar{X}$ = 3.05	$\bar{X}$ = 2.40
VIVID			
losing your marbles	3.29	2.42	2.92
tied to your mother's apron strings	3.29	3.98	1.97
a frog in your throat	3.29	2.67	2.67
wrapped around your little finger	3.40	3.73	3.23
swept off your feet	3.42	4.02	2.34
put your nose to the grindstone	3.47	2.16	2.03
hitting below the belt	3.49	1.56	2.77
robbing the cradle	3.58	3.22	2.69
walking on thin ice	3.58	3.07	2.69
raked over the coals	3.60	2.49	1.64
painting the town red	3.62	2.31	2.05
killing two birds with one stone	3.71	3.27	3.18
rubbing salt in the wound	3.76	2.73	2.13
up a creek without a paddle	3.84	2.33	3.65
putting your foot in your mouth	4.02	2.84	3.26
	$\bar{X}$ = 3.56	$\bar{X}$ = 2.85	$\bar{X}$ = 2.61

SCALE

1	2	3	4	5
Very Masculine	Somewhat Masculine	Neutral	Somewhat Feminine	Very Feminine

SEX SPECIFICITY ASSOCIATION MEANS

MASCULINE		VIVID	USAGE
muscled into it	1.44	2.51	2.13
hitting below the belt	1.56	3.49	2.77
hot under the collar	1.58	3.02	2.54
throwing a wrench in your plans	1.69	2.76	1.77
chip off the old block	1.93	2.78	1.79
in low gear	1.98	2.76	1.79
keeping a poker face	1.98	2.19	1.67
falling for it hook, line and sinker	2.00	3.27	2.67
using elbow grease	2.07	2.93	2.82
out in left field	2.09	2.73	2.26
you've been railroaded	2.11	2.98	1.69
put your nose to the grindstone	2.16	3.47	2.03
getting the shaft	2.20	3.13	2.56
passing the buck	2.29	2.47	2.49
painting the town red	2.31	3.62	2.05
	$\bar{X}$ = 1.94	$\bar{X}$ 2.96	$\bar{X}$ = 2.27
FEMININE			
what's cooking?	4.40	1.96	2.49
on pins and needles	4.18	2.93	2.13
skirting the issue	4.13	2.67	1.59
swept off your feet	4.02	3.42	2.34
your goose is cooked	4.00	2.78	2.23
spilled the beans	3.98	2.78	2.74
tied to your mother's apron strings	3.98	3.29	1.97
living in an ivory tower	3.91	2.58	1.59
spoon-fed all your life	3.91	2.82	2.15
buttering you up	3.91	3.00	3.15
looking at the world through rose-colored glasses	3.84	2.91	1.74
mum's the word	3.82	1.76	1.79
wearing your heart on your sleeve	3.80	2.84	1.26
wrapped around your little finger	3.73	3.40	3.23
no matter how you slice it	3.67	2.36	2.41
	$\bar{X}$ = 3.95	$\bar{X}$ = 2.76	$\bar{X}$ = 2.19

SCALE

1	2	3	4
Never used and cannot imaging using it	Can imagine using it under certain circumstances	Can imagine using it and think I may have used it occasionally	Frequently use it

USAGE MEANS

LEAST		VIVID	SEX
wearing your heart on your sleeve	1.26	2.84	3.80
putting a wrinkle in your plans	1.38	2.58	3.22
skeleton in your closet	1.54	3.18	2.82
skirting the issue	1.59	2.67	4.13
living in an ivory tower	1.59	2.56	3.91
raked over the coals	1.64	3.60	2.49
a stuffed shirt	1.64	2.40	2.42
bringing home the bacon	1.64	2.44	2.36
keeping a poker face	1.67	2.49	1.98
you've been railroaded	1.69	2.98	3.58
living in a glass house	1.72	2.98	3.58
nose out of joint	1.74	2.71	2.73
looking at the world through rose-colored glasses	1.74	2.91	3.84
putting the screws on you	1.74	2.76	1.69
throwing a wrench in your plans	1.77	2.76	1.69
	$\bar{X}$ = 1.62	$\bar{X}$ = 2.80	$\bar{X}$ = 2.90
MOST			
speak of the devil	3.51	3.00	2.60
beating around the bush	3.33	3.09	2.62
something up your sleeve	3.31	2.67	2.78